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Challenges Affecting the Effectiveness of Students' Coping Strategies: Evidence from Darkhan-Uul Province University Students

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Abstract: As global interconnectedness increases, societal complexity is intensifying. The expanding use of digital technologies has contributed to rising individualism among students and to challenges such as reduced concentration, impatience, loneliness, vulnerability to depression, and weakened short-term memory. These trends underscore the need for educators to collaborate with learners, support mutual learning, and address individual differences. Developing instructional approaches that align with students' cognitive processes enables them to identify personal challenges, learn from them, and strengthen their capacity to overcome difficulties. Against this background, the purpose of the present study is to enhance students' coping strategies and to inform the development of a curriculum for a "Stress Management" course. A total of 313 students from the University of Darkhan-Uul Province participated in the study. Coping strategies were assessed using the Brief-COPE psycho-diagnostic instrument, a widely used, reliable, and valid measure of coping styles. Results indicated that students most frequently used Problem-Focused Coping ($M = 2.84$), followed by Emotion-Focused Coping ($M = 2.60$), and Avoidant Coping ($M = 2.50$, 62). These findings suggest that students primarily rely on realistic, problem-oriented strategies, with moderate use of emotional regulation and lower reliance on avoidance-based behaviors, including distraction or risk-prone coping. Overall, the results provide an empirical foundation for designing evidence-based stress management curricula that support students' psychological well-being and adaptive coping skills.

Key words: coping strategies, stress management, learning process

Introduction:

In the 2024–2025 academic year, a total of 65 higher education institutions were operating in Mongolia, of which 34 (52.3%) were universities, 29 (44.6%) were colleges, and 2 (3.1%) were vocational colleges. In Darkhan-Uul Province, higher education is provided by the branch of the National University of Medical Sciences, Darkhan Medical School, the branch campuses of the University of Science and Technology, the University of Humanities, and the University of Agriculture, as well as private institutions such as Darkhan College and Mandakh Accounting College. All of these institutions operate in accordance with the Higher Education Law of Mongolia. Pursuing higher education and acquiring professional qualifications has become an essential requirement in contemporary society, and as a result, the majority of young people enroll in universities. However, tuition fees, accommodation expenses, daily living costs, textbooks, and communication costs place significant financial burdens on students and their families. Living independently, managing academic responsibilities, developing personal competencies, and completing a degree program represent substantial challenges for students. Despite these efforts, not all students successfully navigate this period to achieve their educational goals or acquire essential professional and life skills. Commonly observed challenges include low engagement, lack of interest in courses, absenteeism, tardiness, taking academic leave, and retaking courses. These behaviors indicate that students often struggle to overcome both external and internal obstacles during their studies.

Coping with these challenges is influenced by multiple factors, including family support, peer relationships, teacher guidance, learning environment, and educational technologies. Among these, the most significant determinant is the individual characteristics of the student, particularly resilience, determination, and the strategies employed to cope with stress and challenges. Understanding these coping strategies is critical for designing interventions that support academic success and well-being. Research on students' coping strategies in Mongolia remains limited, and available knowledge is insufficient. Consequently, this study draws upon international literature to inform the investigation of coping behaviors among university students in Darkhan-Uul Province. The findings aim to provide insights that can guide the development of evidence-based interventions to enhance adaptive coping and reduce the impact of academic and personal stressors.

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Literature Review

Foreign researchers' work: Based on the study of students' difficulties by foreign researchers like Fabian Pels, Alina Schäfer-Pels, and Birte von Haaren-Mack, the research evaluated challenges in two different situations and found that the Brief-COPE survey questionnaire was suitable for detecting stress coping among university students. This study confirmed that it is possible to further identify individual characteristics and analyze them across various situations and multiple factors.

Bayram and Bilgel (2008) conducted a cross-sectional study entitled "The prevalence and socio-demographic correlations of depression, anxiety and stress among a group of university students" involving 1,617 students at a Turkish university. The research aimed to assess the prevalence of psychological distress—specifically depression, anxiety, and stress—within this population and to examine associated socio-demographic factors.

Findings revealed that 27.1% of participants reported depressive symptoms, 47.1% experienced anxiety, and 27% exhibited elevated stress levels. First- and second-year students demonstrated significantly higher levels of psychological distress compared to their senior counterparts. Satisfaction with one's chosen field of study emerged as a protective factor against depression, whereas dissatisfaction was positively correlated with heightened anxiety and stress. The authors concluded that the prevalence of depression, anxiety, and stress among university students is alarmingly high, warranting institutional attention. They recommended the implementation of psychological support services, educational interventions, and structured programs to mitigate mental health risks and promote student well-being.

Wong, Cheung, Chan, Ma, and Tang conducted a study entitled "Web-based survey of depression, anxiety and stress in first-year tertiary education students in Hong Kong" involving 7,915 first-year university students. The survey aimed to assess the prevalence of psychological distress among this population.

Results indicated that 21% of students experienced depressive symptoms, 41% reported anxiety, and 27% exhibited elevated stress levels. The findings highlight a considerable burden of mental health problems among first-year students in Hong Kong. The authors emphasized the need for universities to develop professional counseling services and supportive interventions to help students cope with psychological distress and to promote mental well-being during the transition to higher education.

Research Objectives

The overall objective of this study is to identify and enhance how students overcome the difficulties.

Research Purpose

1. To review and analyze theoretical literature on difficulties and coping.
2. To identify pragmatic approaches that students use to overcome difficulties.

Research Hypothesis

It is hypothesized that students' methods of overcoming difficulties are more likely to reflect a positive coping style, viewing obstacles as opportunities for growth.

Scope of the Study

A total of **313 first-year university students** from Darkhan-Uul province participated in the study.

Research Methodology

Study Design and Instrument This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional design to examine coping strategies used by participants when facing stress and adversity. Data were collected using the **Brief Coping Orientation to Problems Experienced (Brief-COPE)** inventory developed by Carver et al. The Brief-COPE is a widely used self-report instrument with established psychometric properties, including acceptable levels of reliability and validity across diverse populations. The original COPE inventory was developed in 1989 as a comprehensive measure of coping responses. Subsequently, in 1997, the authors refined and shortened the instrument, resulting in the **Brief-COPE**, which consists of 28 items designed to assess various coping strategies individuals employ in stressful situations.

Translation and Data Collection For this study, the Brief-COPE questionnaire was translated into Mongolian following standard translation procedures to ensure conceptual equivalence with the original version. Data were collected using an online survey administered through **Google Forms**, which allowed for efficient and anonymous participation. Descriptive statistical analyses were conducted using **SPSS version 26.0**. Key descriptive indicators, including means and standard deviations, were calculated to summarize participants' coping strategies and to provide an overview of response distributions.

Results

Participant Characteristics A total of 313 undergraduate students participated in the study. Of these, 222 participants (70.9%) were female, and 91 (29.1%) were male. With respect to age distribution, the majority of respondents ($n = 204$, 65.2%) were aged between 18 and 22 years. This age distribution is expected, as the study exclusively targeted first-year undergraduate students. Participants were recruited from four higher education institutions located in Darkhan-Uul province. All participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study prior to data collection, and written informed consent was obtained. Participation was entirely voluntary, and anonymity was assured.

Table 1. Distribution of participants by institution (N = 313) Number and distribution of students from the participating universities

No	University	N	Per
1	MNUMS	151	48,2%
2	Darkhan Institute	34	10,9%
3	University of Life Sciences	42	13,4%
4	MUST	86	27,5%

As shown in Table 1, students from both public and private higher education institutions were included in the study. The proportion of participants varied across institutions, reflecting differences in first-year student enrollment numbers rather than sampling bias.

Coping Strategy Scores

Coping strategies were assessed using the Brief-COPE inventory and categorized into three higher-order dimensions: **problem-focused coping**, **emotion-focused coping**, and **avoidant coping**. For each dimension, item scores were summed and mean scores were calculated.

Problem-Focused Coping

Problem-focused coping was measured using eight items (Items 2, 7, 10, 12, 14, 17, 23, and 25), yielding a possible score range of 8 to 32. Lower scores indicate a greater tendency to engage in active and constructive problem-solving strategies when facing stressors.

Emotion-Focused Coping

Emotion-focused coping consisted of twelve items (Items 5, 9, 13, 15, 18, 20, 21, 22, 24, 26, 27, and 28), with total scores ranging from 12 to 48. Lower scores reflect a tendency to internalize emotional responses and limited reliance on external emotional support.

Avoidant Coping

Avoidant coping was assessed using eight items (Items 1, 3, 4, 6, 8, 11, 16, and 19), with possible scores ranging from 4 to 32. Lower scores indicate fewer avoidance behaviors and a reduced likelihood of engaging in maladaptive or risk-related coping patterns.

Comparison of Coping Strategies Across Universities Table 2. Comparison of coping strategy mean scores by institution (N = 313)

University	Problem focused	Emotion focused	Avoid
MNUMS-151	2,87	2,72	2,66
MUST-86	2,88	2,63	2,39
Agriculture University -42	2,71	2,62	2,43
Darkhan Institute-34	2,77	2,6	2,45
Overall mean -313	2,8	2,64	2,5

As shown in Table 2, minor variations in mean scores were observed across institutions for all three coping dimensions. Students from the University of Science and Technology and the National University of Medical Sciences demonstrated slightly higher mean scores in problem-focused coping, whereas avoidant coping scores tended to be lower across all institutions. However, despite differences in sample size among universities, no substantial differences were observed in overall coping strategy patterns between institutions.

Comparative Analysis

The findings of the present study were compared with the results reported by **Fabian Pels, Alina Schäfer-Pels, and Birte von Haaren-Mack**, who examined coping strategies among university students in Germany.

Table 3. Comparison of coping strategies between German and Mongolian students

Coping strategy	German-508 students		Mongolian Darkhan-313 students	
	Overall mean	Average score per person	Total score	Average score per person
Problem focused	17.99	2,2	22,75	2,8
Emotion focused	21.75	1.8	32,04	2,6
Avoid coping	10.51	1.3	20,28	2,5

As shown in Table 3, notable differences were observed between German and Mongolian students across all three coping dimensions. German students demonstrated lower mean scores for avoidant coping strategies, suggesting less reliance on avoidance-based behaviors when dealing with stress. In particular, coping behaviors related to disengagement and substance use, including alcohol consumption, were reported at relatively low levels among German students. In contrast, students from Darkhan, Mongolia exhibited higher mean scores across all coping dimensions, with especially elevated scores in avoidant coping. This pattern indicates a greater tendency to manage stress through distraction-oriented behaviors, including leisure activities and alcohol use. Such differences may reflect variations in sociocultural context, student lifestyles, and the availability of institutional and social support systems.

Conclusion

1. Focusing on and actively engaging with problems and challenges, while developing effective coping strategies, is considered an adaptive approach that can enhance individuals' resilience and overall quality of life.
2. The findings of the present study, based on the Brief-COPE inventory, indicate that first-year students in Darkhan exhibit above-average tendencies to address and manage challenges proactively. At the same time, emotion-focused coping strategies were relatively high, and avoidant coping behaviors—such as distraction, treating challenges as trivial, or engaging in risky behaviors including alcohol consumption—also exceeded average levels.
3. These results do not imply a categorical judgment of students' mental health as either “good” or “poor.” Rather, they highlight a mixed pattern of coping strategies: while students generally demonstrate problem-focused coping, there is a notable reliance on emotion-focused and avoidant behaviors, which may pose potential risks to mental well-being. In light of these findings, it is recommended that higher education institutions integrate guidance on positive coping strategies into the curriculum. This could include incorporating stress management training within individual courses, organizing collaborative activities, and embedding coping-related content into student projects and programs. Such measures may support students in developing healthier coping mechanisms and enhance their psychological resilience throughout their academic journey.

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